THE CIA, THE COLD WAR, AND AMATEUR RADIO

During the decades of the Cold War between the US and the USSR, both sides viewed Amateur Radio as a potential strategic asset. Declassified documents now available online in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Electronic Reading Room include excerpted translations of articles in East Bloc Amateur Radio magazines, as well as assessments of clubs, groups, technical training, and activity — even station equipment information derived from QSL cards — offering fresh insight into how Amateur Radio was used and perceived on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

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Released as part of the FOIA requirements on federal agencies, the declassified documents were only available previously in a closed system at the US National Archives. They relate readily available information in the form of excerpted translations of articles in East Bloc Amateur Radio magazines, as well as assessments of Amateur Radio clubs, groups, technical training, and activity — even station equipment information derived from QSL cards of the day.

Many of the often-redacted and otherwise "sanitized" PDFs appear to be scanned copies of copies of copies, and can be difficult to decipher. Amateur Radio is not the sole topic, although a search on "Amateur Radio" will yield many hits. Individual documents are not searchable, unfortunately.

East vs. West

The CIA kept tabs on random Amateur Radio activities in general, and on those in the Soviet Bloc in particular. Various documents reveal the dichotomy between the US's largely leisure pursuit of Amateur Radio and The USSR's far more institutionalized version. Amateur Radio behind the Iron Curtain was viewed as a patriotic pursuit, with radio amateurs as servants of the state, although not without a certain degree of prestige, because hams were in touch with — or at least listened to broadcasts from — the outside world.

The archive contents reveal how Soviet Bloc governments during the Cold War strictly controlled ham radio and attempted to "collectivize" it in the service of the state, as a means of enhancing the technological expertise of young people; indeed all "radio amateurs" belonged to clubs, and not all of these were hams, per se, but lay technologists.

Individual Amateur Radio stations did not come into being in the USSR until the mid-to-late 1950s, when the advantages of this approach to the state became clear. Ham radio gear in the Soviet Bloc was typically home built, although components were scarce. More on this later.

Western hams of that era were far more likely to concern themselves with the latest offerings from National, Hallicrafters, or Collins, recent exotic DX heard and worked, and occasionally, how to comply with the myriad of FCC rules back then.

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Exploring Amateur Radio as an "Asset"

The CIA at least considered the possibility that Amateur Radio could be co-opted as an information-gathering asset. The author of a once-secret 1948 memorandum, "Responsibility for Detecting those Activities of Licensed U.S. Amateur Radio Stations which are of Interest to U.S. Communication Intelligence Authorities," mulled the monitoring of licensed operators and of "clandestine transmissions," either for internal security or law enforcement reasons, or for foreign intelligence collection.

"In all probability, the foreign intelligence content is virtually negligible," the author concluded.

A 1949 memorandum discussed recruiting radio amateurs from among German nationals legally licensed to operate in the US Zone, "who could be of use in the period immediately following an outbreak of hostilities."

A 1954 CIA report pointed out that Soviet DXers had become accustomed to communicating in English through contesting, which, it said, hams universally regarded as "a giant, king-size game [sic] which definitely separates the men from the boys." The report cited [redacted] who "never heard any additional conversational comments or remarks of possible intelligence value."

A 1949 CIA memorandum, "Exploitation of Radio Amateurs," asserted:

> Except for possibilities in the counterespionage field, it is believed that exploitation of amateurs with reference to the USSR and satellites could lead at best only to information concerning the location of ham transmitters, an item of dubious intelligence value.

A few years later, in 1955, a CIA report of "unevaluated information" noted that the East German government had ordered systematic interception of "all radio traffic from West German radio amateurs," with special attention paid "to those messages in which the amateurs reveal the construction of their station and exchange technical advice." The order called for recording these communications and sending the tapes regularly to the government.

Although no reason for the order was given, "it is believed that the technical experiences of the West German amateurs and their technical possibilities are to be systematically exploited." A heavily redacted 1953 information report indicated that only members of the Socialist Union

Party-controlled Society for Sports and Technology could apply for a ham ticket in East Germany, "after appropriate recommendations have been made."

Regulation and Control

Wireless in general was arguably under the tightest control in East Germany (the German Democratic Republic). A report from 1953 provided information "regarding telecommunications, radio monitoring, and high-frequency installations," saying:

> The monitoring is carried out under great difficulties, because on the one hand, the installation is required to locate illegal transmitters or to observe a certain frequency, whereas on the other hand, it is forbidden to do direction finding. The monitoring installation is therefore forced to do direction finding illegally.

In this vein, secret information in a 1953 report said that, while there were no restrictions on purchasing a radio in Czechoslovakia, "group listening, as well as spreading what one heard, was forbidden and regarded as 'anti-state activity.'" An offender could get 3 years in the Czech slammer. Hams and even shortwave listeners (SWLs) were required to report unregistered transmitters to the Ministry of Posts in Prague.

A darker paragraph in the same document recounted that when a ham's call sign was "changed or abolished," the Ministry of Posts notified the rest of the amateur community. The Ministry of Posts could terminate a license, however. "In the few instances when this happened…reasons were never given; the person in question simply 'discontinued radio amateur transmissions.'" The deleted call sign was never reassigned.

Additionally, "[I]t was made clear to all operators that information on political affairs, locations of industrial installations, and other related classified matters would not be broadcast," the assessment said.

Sovietization

Another document recounted the gist of the editorial in the January 1953 issue of *The Radio Amateur* in Czechoslovakia, which "in typically Communist presentation" lamented "The Slow Progress of the Sovietization of Czechoslovak Amateur Radio."

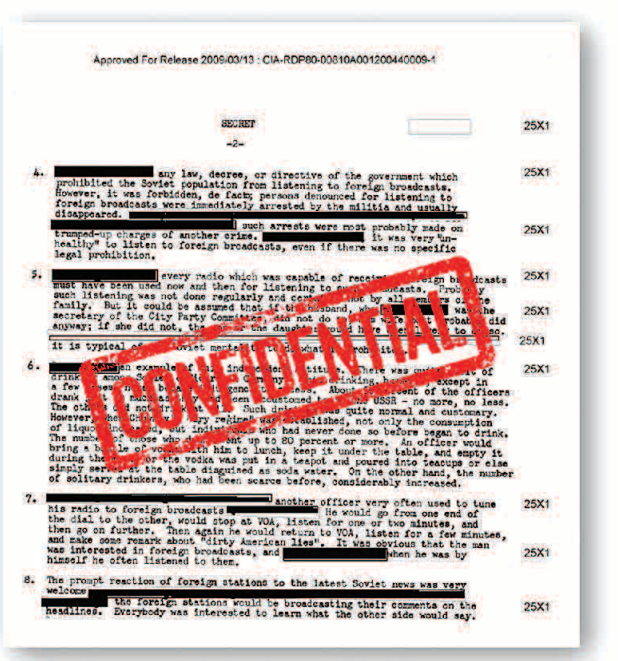
The reporter cited the editorial's effort to zero in on the problem. "One of our greatest faults was our inability to arouse interest in collective amateur work among those who are either active hams or interested in Amateur Radio," the editorial said. "There still are among us too many hams who do not comprehend the political aims of collective ham work and who do not lend aid in the fulfillment of these aims." The editorial touched upon a renewed effort to organize clubs and to train special communications groups of radio amateurs and concluded:

> The main purpose of all radio training will be the creation of politically and technically reliable cadres, which will aid our army, our industries, and other branches of our activities through which we are building up our socialist system and the defense of world peace.

Ham radio was serious business in the Soviet Bloc.

Similar sentiments appear in other documents, including assessments of radio-related activity in the USSR, where Amateur Radio came under the aegis of the paramilitary Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Fleet (DOSAAF), which reported directly to the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

The same report included a page of Morse code abbreviations that Soviet hams were using "in addition to the usual Q codes." A majority of these, the report noted, are abbreviated Russian words and expressions. Soviet hams also employed "Z Codes" — AFB for "strong fading," and ZMO for "wait a while," for example.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4. [redacted] any law, decree, or directive of the government which prohibited the Soviet population from listening to foreign broadcasts. However, it was forbidden, de facto; persons denounced for listening to foreign broadcasts were immediately arrested by the militia and usually disappeared. [redacted] such arrests were most probably made on trumped-up charges of another crime. [redacted] it was very "unhealthy" to listen to foreign broadcasts, even if there was no specific legal prohibition.

5. [redacted] every radio which was capable of receiving foreign broadcasts must have been used now and then for listening to such broadcasts. Probably such listening was not done regularly and certainly not by all members of the family. But it could be assumed that if the husband, who was the secretary of the City Party Committee, did not do it, the daughter would probably did anyway; if she did not, the [redacted] the daughter would have to do so.

It is typical of [redacted] Soviet mentality [redacted] what is prohibited.

6. [redacted] Yet another example of [redacted] the inadequacy of [redacted] There was quite a lot of drinking [redacted] except in a few [redacted] zone [redacted] less. About [redacted] cent of the officers drank [redacted] such [redacted] seen ashamed [redacted] the USSR - no more, no less. The other [redacted] did not drink [redacted] Such drinking was quite normal and customary. However, there [redacted] very regrettable was abolished, not only the consumption of liquor [redacted] but invitations who had never done so before began to drink. The number of those who [redacted] put up to 80 percent or more. An officer would bring a bottle of vodka with him to lunch, keep it under the table, and empty it during the [redacted] for the vodka was put in a teapot and poured into teacups or else simply served at the table disguised as soda water. On the other hand, the number of solitary drinkers, who had been scarce before, considerably increased.

7. [redacted] another officer very often used to tune his radio to foreign broadcasts [redacted] He would go from one end of the dial to the other, would stop at VOA, listen for one or two minutes, and then go on further. Then again he would return to VOA, listen for a few minutes, and make some remark about "dirty American lies". It was obvious that the man was interested in foreign broadcasts, and [redacted] when he was by himself he often listened to them.

8. The prompt reaction of foreign stations to the latest Soviet news was very welcome [redacted] the foreign stations would be broadcasting their comments on the headlines. Everybody was interested to learn what the other side would say.

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CONFIDENTIAL

A "confidential" 1953 report referred to the same article, and acknowledged, "Since these abbreviations are completely different from those used so far in international amateur communications, they may be of use in monitoring Soviet hams' international traffic, as well as contacts with hams in the Iron Curtain countries."

A 1952 "restricted" document of information gleaned from "foreign documents or radio broadcasts" notes "the great success" of radio amateurs in Bulgaria who constructed a station at the Central Radio Club in Sofia:

> Thus, Bulgarian Amateur Radio operators maintain uninterrupted radio communication with ones in the Soviet Union and the People's Democracies, with whom they exchange expertise in radio communications.

It also noted that Bulgarian hams were doing their utmost to prepare for a radiotelegraphy competition and exhibition of radio equipment.

Radio Amateurism and Radiofication

One topic that comes up in a radio connection in these archived documents is something called "radiofication." In part, this involved the deployment of wired loudspeakers or receivers throughout a community, often in lieu of over-the-air receiving devices in each residence, although radios were also part of the plan. Radio amateurs were often drafted to carry out this work, in the service of advancing communist ideology through the diffusion of communication technology. The report mentioned above from sources in Bulgaria noted that a particular factory was mass producing several types of radio amplifiers, including a 40 kW amplifier for Sofia. "After the amplifier is assembled, the capital will be radiofied almost 100 percent," the report said, citing its source. That may be an understatement.

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A 1950 "confidential" report cited a USSR *Radio* magazine editorial by Col. Gen. V.I. Kuznetsov, a decorated Soviet hero, that promoted the development of "radio amateurism." The colonel said it's evident that young people have a great desire to know about radio techniques. "We must aid in organizing clubs in every school and educational institution," he said. "Participation in the radiofication of our *kolkhoz* [collective farm] villages is one of the most important tasks before our radio clubs and all our radio amateurs."

Another *Radio* excerpt from 1950 said, "There is growing evidence of the fulfillment of Lenin's prophecy of complete radiofication of the country." The report continued:

> Young people are making great contributions to the radiofication of villages. In the RSFSR [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic] and the Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia, Armenia, and Georgia — everywhere, new cadres of young enthusiasts, who will comprise the radio engineering experts of the future, are growing in numbers. The Soviet government gives these youngsters every opportunity to pursue their ambitions in this field.

A 1952 report derived from Russian documents or broadcasts outlined the "progress of radiofication" in the USSR, with 556,000 wired speakers in Moscow Oblast reported and just four radio receivers. In Smolensk Oblast, the report said, "Radio amateurs have installed around 1,400 vacuum-tube receivers [and] 20,000 crystal sets." (The grid may have been unreliable.)

P.O. Box 88, Moscow

A 1950 report cited a *Radio* magazine essay from the USSR, "Improving the Work of the Central Radio Club." The account characterized the founding of the Central Radio Club in Moscow as "another manifestation of the care of the party and state for the development of a mass radio amateur movement in our country." The report continued, "The club must become a model for all others. [I]t must procure quality equipment…and build a powerful, collective short-wave station for radio amateurs."

And later, "The doors should be thrown open to young people interested in short waves, receiver construction, television, and many other branches of radio engineering."

Other such reports reveal problems in manufacturing and obtaining quality parts for radio equipment. A CIA report of "unevaluated information" from Czechoslovakia noted the difficulty in procuring "condensers" (as capacitors were commonly called in that era) and resistors and quality new parts. The report said hams were kept busy repairing radios for their friends, "because repairs done at the nationalized shops are much worse in quality."

The CIA, in a confidential report that cited the USSR's *Radio* magazine, detailed the problem of manufacturing "reliable interstage and output transformers" for a particular receiver. Perhaps to highlight the state of the electronics industry in the great Soviet empire, this excerpt cited radio amateur A. Prokepenko, who said:

> It is impossible to repair these transformers, because they are wound without cores and impregnated with a resin compound. As we all know, there are no spare transformers on sale, and consequently damaged transformers cannot be replaced.

He continued:

> It seems to me that it should be possible to construct more durable transformers or at least to place the windings on a core and not impregnate them with resin, so that a radio amateur could rewind them.

So not only did residents of the satellite countries have to rely on hams to repair their radio sets, so did the citizens of Mother Russia.

Lifting the Ban

A somewhat redacted information report from May 1954 discussed the confirmation of a "grapevine rumor" regarding the lifting of restrictions by the USSR on long-distance radio and radiotelephone communication by Soviet hams with those in the Western World, particularly the US. It allowed, "DXers throughout the world have a strong common bond of technical interest and *personality characteristics* [emphasis added]."

"The reported relaxation of the Soviet ban on DX communication with the US in the near future may also, of course, have some military training or even intelligence significance," the report continued. It noted the "well-known fact" that the military services were Amateur Radio's best friend.

The report speculated:

> Were it not for their recognition of the wartime (auxiliary communication net) and peacetime (training and technical development) importance of "hams," the frequencies assigned for amateur use would long ago have been taken away by the governmental communication agencies, responding to pressure exerted through Congress by commercial communications companies who would like to have the amateur frequencies themselves.
>
> Therefore [redacted], if the Soviet military services are involved in the lifting of the ban, perhaps wishing to further develop the same type of benefits believed desirable by the US military services.

There's much more on Amateur Radio and related topics — including international broadcasting during the Cold War — in the CIA Reading Room. Those with an eye to Amateur Radio history will find many of them fascinating, too. You'll find the archive on the CIA's website at **https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/**.

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